

SUGAR

Old Tio Diego lived in a tiny hut on the edge of town.

He was a small wizened old man---small like his home.

Tio Diego was poor—absolutely destitute. Yet for a poor man he did a very curious thing every morning. He left his tiny hut on the edge of town, limped to San Riverol's restaurant in the centre of town, and ordered and paid for a breakfast.

True it was the cheapest breakfast money could buy: black coffee, a few tortillas, a dab of fried beans...still every poor man knows its cheaper to prepare one's own meal than to buy it at a restaurant.

Then one morning the mystery was solved.

Just as Tio Diego had finished his breakfast, paid grudgingly cent by cent for the food and begun limping towards the door, Juanita, San's assistant leaned over and whispered fiercely in San's ear.

"Are you sure, Juanita?" San asked

"Sure I'm sure" snapped Juanita "Shall I run after the old rascal?"

"No-o-o" said San Riverol slowly. "Lets wait till tomorrow. I want to watch this thing for myself. We've got the advantage of him now; we know what he's doing but he doesn't know we know."

The next morning San carefully watched the old man.

Then, after Tio Diego had finished eating, paid carefully and grudgingly cent by cent for the food, and was making for the door, San's voice rang out.

"Just a moment Senor Diego."

At the sound the old man's footsteps quickened; as if by magic the limp disappeared and he raced out of the door.

San Riverol chased after him.

At this point the old man saw flight was useless and slowed down. His limp returned and he pretended he was walking normally—in fact that everything was normal.

A small crowd, sensing a drama, began to follow. Then in the middle of the town square everybody came to a halt.

San addressed the crowd as much as the old man.

"See! See! Every morning for the last I don't know how many years, this old thief comes into my restaurant and says he buy breakfast. But meanwhile, what is the old scamp really doing?" San paused.

Then he pointed at the old man and said "He thieving my sugar off the restaurant table, sliding nearly a cupfull into a paper bag then sneaking the paper bag into his dirty pocket. The man take every day more than the value he leave for the breakfast."

P.2

Tio Diego had stopped trying to look normal under the amused jeers of the still gathering crowd. The mask he now wore was one of indignation to cover his embarrassment.

“You question the honesty of a man old enough to be your father?” Tio Diego quavered.

“Look” San appealed to the onlookers, “tell him to pull out his pockets. Just tell him that. I see him thief my sugar, see him with my own two eyes.”

The old man began to walk away. There were tears of shame, or anger, or both in his eyes.

Then suddenly San seemed to see Tio Diego for the first time.. He was suddenly reminded of his father now in his eightieth year. San turned abruptly and walked back to his restaurant.

That night San filled the biggest paper bag he could find in the restaurant with sugar. Exactly five whole pounds of sugar he put into the bag. Then just before closing time, he gave the bag to Juanita. Refusing any explanation, he ordered her to take it to the little hut on the edge of town and give it to Tio Diego.

Half an hour later Juanita was back.

Then ten minutes later there was a knock at the door. San opened the door. Wordlessly, Tio Diego limped in, put the bag of sugar on the counter, and controlling the quaver in his voice, said “Keep your bloody sugar, Senor San” Then the old man limped out and was swallowed up in the darkness. San stood in amazement drumming his fingers on the counter.

Suddenly Juanita laughed. San whirled angrily round. After Tio Diego’s defiant act of dignity and pride, the girl’s laugh was very like sacrilege. San glared at her.

“The bag!” gasped Juanita, unable to speak properly, her voice half smothered with laughter.

“What is it?” snapped San irritably.

For answer Juanita took up the bag and rested it on the restaurant scale. The red needle sped round and quivered to a stop.

“Nearly a pound less. You gave him five pounds.... there’s only four now. He took out nearly a pound and then bring it back so righteously!” She was almost doubled up with laughter.

San was very angry with her “Shut your mouth. Shut the shop and go home.” He shouted.

Juanita did as she was told. After she’d gone San started thinking and realised that Juanita’s discovery had not detracted from the new dignity he now saw in the old man.

In fact he began, for the first time to admire the old man and hoped that breakfast times would continue as usual.

